The Director

Part 1: The Captain of the Ship

Imagine yourself on a ship. There are lots of folks who help the ship go in the right direction and get to its destination. Sailors furl the masts. Navigators map out courses to take. Even swabbies are needed to keep the ship clean so that others can do their jobs. Of course, on every ship there is a captain. She is the one who makes sure that the ship goes one direction and who makes sure all on board communicate with one another so that the ship runs efficiently and smoothly.

In theatre, the captain of the ship is the director. He makes sure the production team is headed in the right direction. He presents his Director’s Concept to the other theatre artists, who then create artistic theatre using the direction provided by that concept.

Theatre did not always have directors. Before the middle of the 19th century, most theatre was done without a solid and single director. If a great and famous actor happened to be in the company, he or she would often tell the minor actors where to stand or what to do, but few individuals paid attention to the production as a whole.

Then came the Duke.

The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, leader of his own touring theatre company in the 1870s, was obsessed with minute details about which other theatre companies did not worry. He saw the whole stage as a moving painting that needed artistic concepts such as balance and form to be excellent. He began a process of intensive rehearsals, demanded discipline from his actors, and included much more stage business and movement than had been previously seen. Basically, he had a vision for the play and how it should be seen and performed. And he made sure all of the other theatre artists played to that vision.

This gives us a hint of what the director does today, for only minor points of a director’s job has changed since the Duke. Here are some of the responsibilities of a director:

1. Crafts and communicates a DIRECTOR’S CONCEPT.
2. Directs the movement, pace and mood of the play.
3. Makes sure the other theatre artists communicate with each other and that their communications are in line with the director’s concept.
4. Bites fingernails when the show opens.
Part 2: The Director’s Concept

In planning for a play, the director usually presents a DIRECTOR’S CONCEPT to the other theatre artists. Sometimes, the concept is a combined effort between the designers and the director, but the director is usually the one who makes sure it is clear and solid before proceeding. The director’s concept guides the other theatre artists toward a unified production. In other words, it helps them all stay on the same page, or at least in the same book. Here are some good examples of director’s concepts:

**Director’s Concept for A Thousand Cranes**

"The text of Kathryn Schultz-Miller’s short play is a kind of structured memory: through Sadako's brief life, we encounter the Hiroshima bombing as an incomprehensible human act. The issues of race, culture, nuclear war and patriotism are complex for young audiences. Producing ‘A Thousand Cranes’ demands restraint, imagination, the willingness to face horror, the willingness to forgive. In our production we try to stir a young audience's theatrical imagination by presenting another world that seems familiar, a child's flights of fancy as a journey to understanding, a story that is simple yet compelling. In the end, we hope to ask questions rather than teach. If a child can know loss as a necessary outcome of war, and see another culture as human rather than exotic, we have succeeded." Andrew Tsao, Indiana Repertory Theatre.

**Director’s Concept for King Lear**

"King Lear" is a reminder of how quickly a country can be destroyed from within by political back-biting, greed and complacency. Lear takes for granted both his responsibility as king and his land's stability, assuming he can leave the daily running of the country to others while he retires to "the good life". Because Shakespeare’s message is appropriate for any point in history, we have chosen to set this production without specific period or culture. We also wanted to create a raw, elemental world where violence becomes commonplace. Fire, wind and water are placed within a steel structure set upon the earth, giving the set a non-realistic, presentational feel, where one does not expect each location to be fully realized visually. This helps to accommodate Shakespeare's quick and constant scene changes. In the background you can see a vague image of the empire that everyone is trying to capture. It is polluted and corrupt, not beautiful. On this land, no one is immune from the desire for power. In our "King Lear" there are no heroes and there is ultimately no innocence; everyone gets their hands dirty. As the battles both political and personal ensue, the story reveals itself to be actually a quest for love and understanding, and what is truly important in life.” Karen TenEyk, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park.

**Director’s Concept for The Illusion**

"At age 18, Peirre Corneille (1606-1684) began his career as a lawyer, only to abandon it for the theatre five years later. In 1636, during a period when the theatre in France was enjoying a slight gain in prestige, Corneille wrote 'L'Illusion Comique'. He referred to this play as a "strange monster" because of its
unconventional blend of theatrical styles and its violation of Aristotle's three unities of place, time and action—the theatrical dogma of the period. "Corneille's use of a cave as Alcandre's place of enchantment draws on a European tradition in which caves were regarded as mystical entities—metaphors for the cosmos—places where magic and a sense of the divine dwelled. During the Baroque period, in which Corneille was writing, caves had become a popular theatrical setting where the triumph of art over nature was demonstrated (for instance, mechanical devices were built to fashion fountains out of natural pools of water). This Baroque ideal is reflected in Alcandre's ability to create illusion as splendor and refinement within the rough and primitive environment of the cave." David Esbjornson, The Classic Stage Company (New York).

To create a director's concept, the director usually explains his initial thoughts about:

1. the themes of the play
2. mood and atmosphere (that will best communicate the themes of the play)
3. overall look or feel (that will best communicate the themes of the play)
4. general observations about character (that will best communicate the themes of the play)
5. general observations about the virtual space (the setting) of the play
6. general observations about the language and symbols found in the play
7. practical thoughts on the time period of the play

For any one of these elements, the director may choose to go into great detail or not approach it at all. Perhaps you can see the beginnings of tyrannical despotism here, and there is a danger of that happening if the director goes into great detail about the setting or costumes, for instance, and does not allow the costume or set designer the artistic freedom they would prefer. So directing takes a deft hand, and a personality that seeks to include everyone and validate appropriate ideas.

Looking at the director's concept above for *A Thousand Cranes*, we can see that the director has approached theme most completely, and he has given good clues to the feel of the play in terms of setting and costumes and acting. Can you see the clues? Words like "restraint," "child's flights of fancy," "willingness to face horror," and "simplicity" are good hints at what he's trying to achieve. These are wonderful and tantalizing clues for a design artist, don't you think?

The director's concept for *King Lear* is likewise tantalizing. Take a look at the words director Karen TenEyk uses to stimulate her designers and other artists: "raw, elemental world where violence becomes
commonplace," "polluted and corrupt," "desire for power," and "everyone gets their hands dirty." Her description of the setting does set some restrictions on the set designer, but it is not so detailed that it will impede the designer's artistic choices. This concept is very clear and gives very clear "rules" for the artists to follow.

The director's concept for The Illusion dwells on the play's historical setting and the popular conventions of the time. Yet even this concept gives artists a place to go. We know that the setting will be a cave, and we are also given some other clues: "splendor and refinement within the rough and primitive environment of the cave," "triumph of art over nature," and various allusions to magic and occult.

Activity
"Director's Concept"

Write your own director's concept. Be sure to include all six of the director's concept elements described above to one degree or another, and remember that you are NOT the set designer or costume designer or actors, so see if you can give clues rather than mandates.

One way to start is to simply write the three or four most evocative words or phrases you can think of to describe the feel of how you want the play to look. Let these words guide you as you begin your descriptions. You can approach each of the seven elements in this way, finally linking them together in a nice paragraph. Please pay attention to grammar and punctuation!